

Building bridges for nonviolent change: Women insider mediators in peaceful protest movements

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What is the policy brief about?

This policy brief aims to enhance our understanding of the various contributions women make as informal bridge-builders within the context of peaceful protest movements, as well as how they navigate the gender-based constraints to their participation. It further seeks to consider what impact their activities may have on transforming gender norms, even beyond the movement. Building on case studies undertaken in Iraq, Thailand and Venezuela, this policy brief provides specific recommendations for how international donors and practitioners can fulfil capacity-building and support needs to empower these women to sustain and deepen their engagement as insider mediators, thereby expanding the potential for achieving peaceful change and conflict transformation.

Why is the topic relevant?

Women not only play prominent leadership roles in protest movements, but may also take on less visible insider mediator roles. They build bridges between various sets of actors, either to protect activists and mitigate violence or to advance conflict transformation. As there exists a proliferation of such movements – and their potential for spontaneous violent clashes – over the past decade, peacebuilding frameworks must be expanded to encompass informal bridge-building practices.

For whom is it important?

This policy brief is primarily addressed to the international Women Peace and Security community, including donors and policy actors, as well as international mediation and peacebuilding practitioners.

Key recommendations

- ≡ Recognise nonviolent movements as important arenas for women to develop and practice their leadership and conflict resolution skills.
- ≡ Facilitate recognition for women’s bridge-building contributions within movements by supporting gender-informed capacity-building measures that leverage women’s positions as mediators.
- ≡ Adopt an intersectional lens toward capacity-building.
- ≡ Collaborate closely with local and transnational efforts to foster peer learning and sharing on nonviolent action and human rights.
- ≡ Allocate resources to provide well-being support, including psychological and physical protection.
- ≡ Support local efforts to make legal and institutional changes that are conducive to including women in mediation processes.
- ≡ Identify, connect and engage with women activist and bridge-builders emerging from social movements during formal mediation processes.



Pro-democracy protester in Bangkok gives three finger salute. Photo © Picture Alliance / ZUMAPRESS.com | Geem Drake

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1 Introduction

The past decade has seen a global proliferation of mass movements demanding societal, constitutional and institutional change. These pro-democratic, peaceful protest movements (PPMs) have arisen in response to various factors including economic distress, systemic violence, political repression, or restrictions placed on civil society. PPMs can become vectors of societal conflict, and experience direct and often spontaneous confrontations between citizens and their governments that may erupt into violence. As these clashes have grown increasingly prevalent, peacebuilding scholars and practitioners began expanding their understanding of peace mediation, from Track 1 formal processes aimed at resolving armed conflicts, to encompass informal practices that frequently originate in the grassroots sphere. Often initiated by individual ‘insider mediators’,¹ these activities bridge gaps in state-society relations, thereby further facilitating constructive socio-political change.

While they are effective at mobilising large social constituencies and pressuring for change, nonviolent mass protest movements are often denied a seat at the elite-led dialogues that make up formal negotiations or political transitions (Dudouet 2023a, 2023b, Belgioioso et al. 2024). Nevertheless, grassroots activists do engage in processes of informal and situated mediation, which may occur during or between cycles of protests, either between different factions within a movement, or between activists on one hand and community members, government actors, security forces, or even armed groups on the other. Research shows a positive correlation between women’s participation in PPMs and adherence to nonviolence, even in the face of severe repression (Chenoweth 2019). Women tend to play prominent leadership roles in movements but may also take on less visible insider mediator roles; they build bridges between various sets of actors, either to protect activists and mitigate violence or to advance conflict transformation.

This policy brief synthesises the results of practice-oriented and gender-sensitive research and needs assessments of women who inhabit diverse bridge-building roles in the context of PPMs. Three case studies were undertaken in Iraq, Thailand and Venezuela (Hammadi 2024, Sae Chua and Buranajaroenkij 2024, Picon 2024), to identify women’s insider mediation roles according to function, degree of formality and visibility, and conflict stakeholders. The studies equally examine how women entered these roles by exploiting certain gender norms and bypassing others. This policy brief aims to enhance our understanding of these roles, and to provide specific recommendations for how international policy actors and donors can help empower these women to sustain and deepen their engagement, thereby enhancing the potential for peaceful change and conflict transformation.

The analysis is based on qualitative interviews conducted in late 2023 with relevant movement actors, activists, observers, as well as civil society organisations and state authority representatives in the three countries. The women interviewed and featured in the studies may not necessarily self-identify as mediators, but are depicted as such by activists and observers due to their positions of trust and access to conflict parties, as well as the positive outcomes of their interventions. In the spirit of participatory research methodology, the field studies were conducted by local scholars who had trusted access to the respective movements, either as activists themselves or as close allies and sympathetic observers.

¹ Insider mediators are defined as locally-rooted individuals who support official peace processes in conflict regions through informal dialogue facilitation between or within conflict parties. They draw their mandate and legitimacy from their in-depth knowledge on the context, cultural closeness and/or kinship to the conflicting actors (see e.g. Mason 2009, UNDP 2018).

2 Women's mediation roles within socio-political movements

While the three case studies comprised distinct contexts, several clear patterns of women's bridge-building roles in PPMs emerged from the research. This section briefly highlights protest dynamics within the three countries and presents key lessons on women's contributions to preventing and de-escalating threats of violence, as well as facilitating mutual understanding between the movement and society or governmental authorities, and even between different factions within the movement.

2.1 Iraq

The Tishreen protests began in October 2019, sparked by a social media call to action to voice outrage at governmental corruption, poor public services and unemployment. The movement grew when university students demanding job opportunities were mistreated by security forces at Tahrir Square in Baghdad. In a show of solidarity, young people from impoverished areas joined the students on the streets. These demonstrations stood out for their spontaneousness, geographic reach, and large numbers of participants, including a significant number of women, despite societal gender norms limiting their public presence. The movement was violently repressed through systematic assaults by security forces and unknown armed groups, leading to the deaths of hundreds of protesters. In addition, conflicts occurred among the protesters due to divergent political orientations and cultural, educational and economic backgrounds. Outside of protest arenas, conflicts also arose with segments of society that rejected the very idea of protesting.

Women took up diverse strategies and roles to prevent and manage these conflicts and to preserve the movement's adherence to nonviolence. Some women protesters demonstrated intuitive abilities as insider mediators, despite never having previously undergone training. They encouraged opening communication channels among the movement's factions, for instance, to help them deliberate positions and formulate claims, and to present these externally. Others acted as mediators between aggrieved protesters and police to address mistrust, or created 'human chains' to shelter activists from attacks by security forces or to prevent arrests. The efforts of the women mediators focused on building trust and understanding between the protesters, society, government representatives and media outlets. However, no formal spaces for dialogue or negotiation were established between the government and the movement.

When a curfew was imposed in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the protests came to a halt. The women of the Tishreen movement took different paths in the post-protest stage, according to their economic and educational situations. Educated women who could rely on the support of their families contributed to the establishment of new political parties. Remarkably, there was a significant increase in the number of women who joined political parties and went on to win parliamentary seats the 2021 parliamentary elections. Regardless, the conservative government has cracked down on public gatherings to prevent a resurgence of protests, often through violence. Most women activists lost their freedom to be present in protest arenas as a result. In mid-2023, religious political parties launched a widespread campaign restricting personal freedoms and encouraging the targeting of women activists, which effectively suppressed any attempt to demand women's rights through the cultivation of an atmosphere of fear.

2.2 Thailand

In March 2020, at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, Thai youth took to the streets to show their discontent over the decision of the Constitutional Court to dissolve the Future Forward Party. Many of these first-time voters had voted for this new political party in the 2019 general election, the first following the 2014 coup. What initially appeared to be an expression of anger by youth over the rejection of their political orientation soon evolved into nationwide movements against the military regime. Concurrently, high school students mobilising for educational reform and against human rights restrictions organised flash mobs and other creative protests, both online and in person, and also joined the larger pro-democracy demonstrations.

The movement was briefly disrupted due to a lockdown during the pandemic, and resumed in August 2020 with protests in Bangkok and other provinces. By that time, it had evolved to include demands to reform the monarchy, and to address social and cultural structures that sustained inequality and authoritarian power in Thai society. As a result, the peaceful protests faced severe physical and legal suppression by the Thai state government. Many leaders and protesters, including minors, were arrested, and some demonstrations were forcefully dispersed.

In the absence of formal spaces for mediation between the pro-democracy movement and authorities, many individual women actively engaged in discreet dialogue efforts to protect activists, prevent violence and defuse confrontations – as negotiators, mediators, facilitators, or educators. For example, they facilitated intra-movement discussions about protest tactics and consensus-building on proposals and strategies. They also prepared protesters to engage in negotiations with authorities by equipping them with relevant legal knowledge, thereby contributing to levelling the ‘playing field’ in instances of severe imbalance in resources between activists and the government. On another occasion, a woman journalist created bridges between protesters and local community members, helping the former to explain their causes and claims, and the latter to convey their concerns and fears related to the protests. This dialogue was also relayed to the general public through media broadcasts, thereby communicating accurate facts about the movement, and eventually convincing authorities to change their approach to the protest. Another woman described her educational work on nonviolent communication with activists, which helped alleviate the adversarial dynamic at the protest arena, mitigating the potential for violence. While such insider mediators intervened in their individual capacity, others mobilised their organisations in support of violence prevention, for instance, by helping create safe zones for children and youth at protest sites in coordination with human rights institutions.

By 2022, however, the street protests dwindled in favour of small-scale and online activism, largely due to state suppression. A handful of the women activists took on political careers and gained parliamentary seats in the 2023 general elections, whilst others have maintained a low profile as they await pending trials.

2.3 Venezuela

Over the past 20 years, Venezuela has gone through a process of democratic backsliding, resulting in political conflict between the governments of Hugo Chavez (1998-2013) and now President Nicolas Maduro, and their political opposition. This period was marked by three protest cycles that were met with heavy repression. The 2014 and 2019 cycles took place after presidential elections that were either contested or deemed fraudulent by the opposition and according to international standards. The 2014 ‘La Salida’ protests were short-lived, started by university students and supported by only a part of the political opposition, while the 2019 mobilisations were called by the National Assembly in support of the establishment of an interim government. Furthermore, in 2017, a four-month protest cycle erupted a result of a worsening economic situation characterised by scarcity and hyperinflation, and due to the regime’s decision to halt a referendum initiative over Maduro’s presidency. During these years, six negotiation processes were

undertaken to find a solution to the different crises, and have failed.

As the social, humanitarian and political crises have grown more acute, autonomous social movements fighting for concrete social causes have emerged, including gender equality, LGBTQI+ rights, labour rights, the right to the city and the protection of nature and ecosystems. In this context, women have taken on specific social and political roles allowing them to mediate within political movements, between their different fractions, and between these and the state. These roles were exercised at different levels of society, from government and high-level decision-making spaces, to grassroots organisations. For many, their activist identity overlapped with, complemented and promoted their role as insider mediators – allowing them to create or curate spaces between different parties to establish communication channels, generate trust and eventually reach specific agreements. Interviewees recounted instances in which they mediated between different factions of the pro-democracy movement, based on their close relationships with their representatives, often within the framework of institutions and coalition bodies formed by opposition parties and CSOs. Some women also transformed their activism in the context of protest mobilisation cycles into community work, building their own platforms to advocate for nonviolence. This was often done through organising joint activities bringing people together such as training and education, instead of direct conflict mediation.

Following the presidential election in July 2024 in which Maduro declared victory, protests broke out anew in reaction to allegations of voter fraud. Demonstrations have been met with violence by military, police and armed groups. Moreover, the sustainability of women-centred mediation and collaboration spaces is in jeopardy by the political polarisation associated with the 2024-2025 electoral cycle.

Conclusions:

In all three countries, women occupied myriad, overlapping roles as bridge-builders between a diverse set of interlocutors, and with varying degrees of visibility. These roles fit into the following axes of differentiation:

- ≡ Conflicts within the movement, between the movement and society, between the movement and state authorities (e.g. security forces, government actors, public servants);
- ≡ Spontaneous or planned interventions, connected to the degree of protest spontaneity, the pace of events and need for immediate action (e.g. quick response needed to prevent repressive violence against protesters), the degree of movement organising (e.g. establishment of coordination platforms), and the levels of professional trainings by women mediators;
- ≡ Complementary aims of interventions, from prevention or de-escalation of violence, to unification of claims and positions, protection of activists, and trust-building between parties (e.g. shaping a more nuanced understanding of the opposite side), with affected communities and the broader public;
- ≡ Different types and methodologies of interventions including mediation, facilitation, negotiation, and other peacebuilding roles more broadly (e.g. public education).

3 Gendered dynamics that shape women's bridge-building roles

Women's mediation roles in the context of protests are highly interwoven with the prevalent socio-cultural norms related to gendered behaviour, the position of women in public and political life, and society more broadly. This section highlights lessons on the intersection and dynamics between gender roles and mediation effectiveness.

3.1 Gender norms in mediation intervention: a 'resource' and constraint

Certain attributes associated with gender norms may be exploited to enter into bridge-building roles. In the Thailand case, some protest leaders and negotiators as well as insider mediators felt their appearance as women allowed them to intervene more effectively; being perceived as 'attractive' or 'feminine' led them to seem less of a threat to all parties. The Venezuelan and Iraq case studies show that women's authority for mediation is often drawn from the norm of motherhood. When tensions are raised, women may be able to engage the conflicting parties in dialogue by comparing themselves with the mothers of other protesters or security officials, for example, to ease hostility and prevent violence. Furthermore, it is considered taboo in Iraqi society to hit or touch women's bodies in public spaces. Women depended on this norm when they placed their bodies between protesters and security forces, succeeding in protecting many youths from arrest. In all three countries, women proactively relied on stereotypical images of masculinity and femininity in their mediation roles.

However, gender roles are also restrictive. In Iraq, women from conservative areas and sectors needed to obtain approval from their families to participate in protests. Furthermore, it is not customary for women to be seen in public after dark, and many conflicts between protesters took place during the evenings, precluding women's ability to play mediating roles. Within the protest arenas, conservative political parties attempted to separate women and men, and women organised feminist protest marches in response.

In Venezuela, protest movements are usually led by political parties and formal CSOs, whose resources are managed by male political leaders. As a result, women must contend with financial restrictions and limited resources in their endeavours to build bridges between other women from different political factions. This financial hierarchy has the additional effect of inhibiting women's willingness to defend opinions that diverge from those held by their male leaders, as these women are financially dependent on the latter as salaried employees. Interviewees also noted a discrepancy in international funding patterns, between donors' willingness to support women in leadership, but allotting funding to be managed by men.

3.2 Intersectionality

The roles and opportunities available to women are influenced by contextual factors. In Iraq, some women's options are constrained by a lack of education, lower economic and social status, or age. When these women engage in behaviour that is contrary to gender stereotypes, they may face more severe penalties compared to those who have alternative options, sources of power, networks and resources. By contrast, intra-movement coordination and dialogue roles were primarily performed by women lawyers

and journalists who hold academic, political, and legal knowledge that distinguished them from other protesters and legitimised their leadership. The Venezuela case study likewise confirms the intersectional dimension of women's participation. Whereas the authority and legitimacy for women's involvement in mediation and political roles is often based on a perception of motherhood, it was also reported that young women are excluded from roles in political leadership.

Despite the absence of an explicit agenda or specific measures to promote women's leadership, the pro-democracy movement in Thailand has received praise for its commitment to equality. Women and LGBTQI+ individuals have been able to actively participate in various roles. The emphasis on human rights and democratic values has created an inclusive space where women can confidently assume leadership roles and become credible communicators, mediators or negotiators with grassroots communities as well as state authorities.

3.3 Protests as transformative arenas

Women mediators in PPMs are both constrained by intersecting norms and reliant upon them, yet, there are encouraging signs of positive shifts that are occurring through their participation in these movements. Their activism, leadership, mobilisation, negotiation, and mediation roles were acknowledged and valued by movements. Such interventions not only serve to advance the movement causes by unifying protest claims and upholding nonviolence, but also shift the perception of the roles women can play in the political public sphere. Many, especially young male protesters, had never discussed politics with a woman before. In the reports on Iraq and Thailand, young women are described as 'brave' and 'unconventional' due to their willingness to transgress gender norms. In fact, it was stated that Iraq witnessed two revolutions: one for 'the homeland' and another for women.

Conclusions:

- ≡ Perceived attributes such as femininity or mothering have been exploited by women to fulfil or enhance bridge-building roles. Though the perception of women as non-threatening can enable the former to defuse tensions, this same stereotype can exclude them from other arenas.
- ≡ Women who seek to participate in PPMs must often navigate gendered challenges, and their engagement is shaped by multiple intersecting factors. Those lacking power, resources, or alternative options face greater challenges and may encounter harsher penalties when defying gender norms.
- ≡ PPMs are also arenas in which gender norms can be challenged and transformed, shifting public perceptions about women's abilities and roles in the public sphere.

4 Opportunities for women to sustain these roles in formal political/negotiation spaces

This policy brief presents strategies women employ to circumvent hindrances and take up opportunities to engage as informal peacebuilders within the context of movement mediation, facilitation and negotiation. However, their successes in informal arenas does not guarantee access to formal negotiations, constitutional processes or other elite-led decision-making spheres. Mass protest movements tend to be far more inclusive than formal political spaces with respect to gender, despite the multitude of constraints that women do indeed face. Such movements that have men and women on the streets entails limited hierarchy, which is incomparable to the ‘glass ceiling’ barring women from formal political spaces. The latter is an arena structured by learned and reproduced norms regarding appropriate behaviour and allocations of power. Research found that 99% of observed nonviolent campaigns featured women at the frontlines (Chenoweth 2019); by contrast, women are often excluded from formal decision-making spaces through barriers to leadership and influence in established, hierarchical, centralised political parties (Brechenbacher and Hubbard 2021).

Nevertheless, the case studies presented here show that nonviolent movements are important arenas for women to train their leadership and conflict resolution skills. The protest movements in Thailand and Iraq have both led to the formation of new political parties, some of whose prominent leadership roles are held by women activists.

The long-term pro-democracy movement in Venezuela has been built through years of organising, and has made various formal attempts to negotiate with the regime. Many women became skilled in nonviolent action during protest campaigns. They were subsequently able to institutionalise their activism as community organisers and trainers, or as mediators in more formalised spaces of negotiation within the pro-democracy camp, such as between different political parties to identify a joint candidate in primary elections. In addition, these women can profit from coordination platforms and personal networks as tools for leverage, especially when it comes to accessing formal and higher-level fora. Such institutionalised platforms create the authority and support that can usually only be generated by men in patriarchal Venezuelan society. This is also true for Thailand, as stated by one interviewee: “Institutional support and recognition are pivotal in empowering individual women to take on mediative roles.”

Conclusions:

- ≡ The ‘horizontal’ nature of social movements facilitates women’s ascension to leadership and mediation roles in PPMs, while women face greater gender barriers in established political parties and Track 1 negotiations.
- ≡ Women activists within protest movements advance change in the perception of gender roles, which may result in more formal representation through e.g. elected positions.
- ≡ Creating organisational platforms or building strong relationships with established organisations can provide the leverage and authority required to bring women into more prominent and formalised mediation roles within or beyond the protest movement.

5 Recommendations for international peacebuilders, policy actors and donors

- ≡ **Recognise nonviolent movements as important arenas for women to develop and practice their leadership and conflict resolution skills.** Despite the informal or spontaneous nature of their roles, women activists and stakeholders make crucial contributions to these movements and their democratic aspirations, and in so doing, should be supported in continuing these roles beyond the movement.
- ≡ **Facilitate recognition for women's bridge-building contributions within movements by supporting gender-informed capacity-building measures that leverage women's positions as mediators.** Capacity-building support should offer access to theoretical and practical trainings that integrate activities and simulation exercises on mediation, negotiation and dialogue facilitation, effective (nonviolent) communication, conflict transformation, as well as human rights principles and relevant legal knowledge, while taking into account participants' specific context. A formal qualification would lend participants credibility and authority, particularly in patriarchal contexts.
- ≡ **Adopt an intersectional lens toward capacity-building.** Trainings and education initiatives should empower women across generations and social sectors, including in poorer and rural communities, and/or conservative contexts. These may also include enhancing skills to improve women's economic autonomy and to establish fundraising networks and support systems, including by connecting them with societal allies, mentors and support actors.
- ≡ **Collaborate closely with local and transnational efforts to foster peer learning and sharing on nonviolent action and human rights.** Capacity-building on nonviolent action would help the movements to advance their cause in peaceful ways. Support for peer-learning and exchange on insider mediation for women activists across regions, across movements, and across countries, would help energise and inspire them to sustain their local engagement.
- ≡ **Allocate resources to provide well-being support, including psychological and physical protection.** Given the severe state suppression of PPMs, it is imperative to address the well-being of activists and insider mediators, safeguarding their health and safety as they continue to advocate for change. This is particularly true for women who have been persecuted or targeted.
- ≡ **Support local efforts to make legal and institutional changes that are conducive to including women in mediation processes.** Such measures would include enshrining formal women's participation in mediation processes into law and/or institutional regulations, as well as establishing government institutions that serve as a mediation platform.
- ≡ **Identify, connect and engage with women activist and bridge-builders emerging from social movements during formal mediation processes.** International hosts, sponsors, supporters and facilitators of peace processes in conflicts involving protest movements should map out and interact with women bridge-builders playing informal and often invisible mediation roles. Together, they should

identify appropriate strategies for promoting their contributions to peace and change and leveraging their roles in formal spaces of negotiation and decision-making, if they wish to do so – while preparing for the possible gender backlash that may result from this increased visibility.

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